



Quick Steps

Information to Help Your Stepfamily Thrive

Get to Know Your Stepkids

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Stepparents have good intentions. They mean well, really they do. They want to get to know their stepchildren and in turn, encourage their stepchildren to know them. Most stepparents ache for a legitimate role in the family and a true connection with their partner's children. Unfortunately, wanting something doesn't always mean it's going to happen—at the very least as quickly as one wants it to. Why? Because stepfamilies are complicated families with a history of loss. The very definition of stepfamily means that a previous relationship has ended. And loss can bring with it feelings like fear, sadness, anger, resentment, and disappointment to name just a few. People in a stepfamily often come to their new family feeling guarded, because no one wants to have any of those other feelings again.

Too Much Too Soon

Enter a well-meaning stepparent who tries to build relationships with stepchildren with all the energy and enthusiasm of a jet engine at takeoff. What happens? Kids get overwhelmed and then shut down, and everyone is discouraged.

Slow and Steady Wins This Race

Family researchers who study stepfamilies advise stepparents to take things slowly with stepchildren. Don't try to replace a parent or be the primary disciplinarian. Instead, take all the time you and your stepchildren need to feel comfortable with each other—maybe as long as two years or sometimes longer.

In her electronic book, *99 Things to do with Stepkids*, Evelyn Fielding offers creative, yet amazingly simple ideas for stepparents and stepchildren. The book is intended for use with stepchildren at a

distance, but the ideas can easily be adapted to a variety of family situations. Start with Fielding's ideas, then customize to your stepfamily as you go along.

Creative Ways to Connect

- Make a list of thirty things you have in common. Start with the obvious ones—two eyes, one nose etc.—because finding thirty will be a fun challenge.
- Send a jewelry-making kit or other craft project that you know would interest or intrigue your stepchild.
- Start a collection. Help your stepchild gather rocks, stamps, pencils, or whatever is collectible, then add to the collection when you're together.
- Send a book of coupons to be redeemed for things like breakfast in bed; \$5 to spend at the bookstore; choose to sit in the chair of your choice at dinner; all the hugs you want, etc.
- Pay attention to the sports your stepchild likes and watch events together (even if you're not in the same house.) Then talk about what happened.
- Play online games together. Get a wild game of scrabble or chess going.
- Cook long distance. Send a package of simple ingredients and get together by phone as your stepchild starts cooking.
- Make the next letter you send a jigsaw puzzle for your stepchild to piece together.
- Watch a TV program, then call or e-mail to discuss it.
- Make up silly associations to join. For example, the PPAA—Pet Petters Association of America. Be playful.

Be sure to check with the other parent before launching into activities. Their support and permission will help tremendously. For more of Evelyn Fielding's ideas, go to www.mystepkids.com

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